

COLONIAL PEARL.

A VOLUME DEVOTED TO POLITE LITERATURE, SCIENCE AND RELIGION.

Published every Friday evening, at 17s. 6d. per Annum.

VOLUME THREE.

FRIDAY EVENING, FEBRUARY 2, 1839.

NUMBER FIVE.

Forget Me Not for 1839.

THE CORNISH WRECKER.

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There are popular fallacies, which though generally believed, are seldom publicly asserted, and thus, like the slanders of private scandal, they long remain unrefuted. To these belongs the notion that the natives of the Cornish coasts make it their custom during stormy nights to lead horses with lanterns attached to their heads along the summit of cliffs, that ships may be lured to destruction by false lights. This inconsiderate fable we have seen gravely administered to the public within the last ten years. Then there are dark hints of murder committed on the victims of shipwreck, that the right of the wreckers to their pillage might remain undisputed; while all the recollections of sea-shore violence on the coast of England are carried westward, and confused into a monstrous idea that the fathers of the present generation of Cornish fishermen and miners not long ago made wholesale murder a pastime if not a profession; and even yet are their sons supposed to give strong indications of their parentage.

We frankly confess that the world may be many years older ere the coast-born poor of Cornwall can be brought to respect, on principle, property cast upon the beach by the violence of the elements; custom for centuries having apportioned such waifs to the finder, still profanely are they called God-sends; but we are fairly borne out in saying that on no part of the coast of England is more self-devotion displayed for the safety of a distressed vessel whilst aid can be afforded her, or for the rescue of life when her destruction is inevitable.

The following incidents, the leading facts of which will, perhaps, be remembered by the Cornish reader, may serve to exhibit a wreck on the coast of Cornwall in its true colours; we shall only add that, while there are instances in the recollection of many, where gallant Cornish wreckers have perished in their endeavours to save the shipwreck, the records of murders committed on the unfortunates thrown upon their shores exist but in the unsubstantiated legends of by-gone years.

Deep was calling unto deep, the red lightning pointed like the finger of a destroying angel from out the thunder-cloud, and the messenger of wrath revealed amid the blackness of night a doomed vessel contending with the breakers of a rocky shore. Rolling heavily, she ground her keel on the fatal reef that held her till the fires and winds of heaven and the rage of the foaming waves had done their worst, making a wreck of the good ship Planter, homeward-bound West Indianman. The reader may, perhaps, tremble for the fate of the hapless mariners of that bark, even should they escape from "the hell of waters" that surrounds them, our scene being laid on a wild part of the coast of Cornwall, where a throng of suspicious-looking fishermen and gaunt miners crowd the beach. The vessel is fast going to pieces; every wave that passes over her washes from his clinging hold some despairing wretch whose life-grasp yields to the suction of the retreating waters. The Cornish wreckers, joined hand in hand, are in the breakers. The foremost of each line, supported by those behind him, grasps at the senseless forms tossed amid the surge, or casting a rope to the swimmer whose strength is failing him, they rob the sea of its prey. Ere the ship broke up a hawser had been passed to her, by which many of her crew and passengers were saved, and every fire of the neighbouring cottages had its crowd of these sufferers, when their companions in misfortune, rescued at a later period of the wreck, arrived.

Divers are the rude efforts to arouse consciousness in the apparently dead, and with what joy is the return of animation hailed by the wives and children of the fisherman! The men, when they have deposited their burdens of suffering humanity, again repair to the beach; but now it is too evident that the sea no longer supports on its troubled wave aught of the victims of shipwreck but the swollen and mangled corpse. The bale, the wine-cask, the shattered timber, and the broken spar, chests, crates and cases, are dashed on the shore by the rushing tide, but no more of human life is there to be rescued. This night Symey Cove has lost one of the boldest of its fishermen; and on the morrow a name will be called at the neighbouring mine which will be answered only by the wail of the widow and the cry of the orphan. Two of the rescuers have perished. While a single human being was to be saved, bravely did the wreckers struggle with the waters, but now they conceive that they have won their reward, and truth obliges us to present a degraded picture of those who have as yet deserved our warmest approbation.

A scene not less grotesque than picturesque is displayed on that shore. Boxes and packages are broken open; wearing apparel,

and goods of divers kinds, are scattered on the beach. Fires are lighted, wine and spirit-casks spiled; while men, and even boys, drink from buckets, hats, and shoes, till each puncheon has a groupe of noisy Bacchanals around it. Now come the galloping yeomanry, hastily called out; the excisemen, the custom-house officers and their assistants, together with the posse comitatus of neighbouring gentry. After a few sharp contests with the wreckers, some little attention is ensured to the rights of property; and by daybreak large piles of goods saved are heaped on the beach, guarded by the sailors of a revenue-cutter on the station and the dismounted yeomanry. Such was the wreck of the Planter West Indianman, in the winter of 179—, on the coast of Cornwall.

But we must leave for a while the crowded strand, and turn our attention towards a cottage, where an elderly matron and a fair girl, whose beauty would have graced a prouder dwelling, were awaiting the return of Hannibal Strike, who had been all night abroad. The woman, in her short cotton jacket, woollen petticoat, and check apron, looked well the fisher's wife, as she was impatiently gazing from the door into the early dawn, fancying every wayfarer that approached from the direction of the wreck him whom she sought; but a nearer view would convince her that she beheld not the stalwart form, grey head, and embrowned visage, of one of the boldest fishermen, the best of pilots, and withal the most determined wrecker on that part of the coast, for such was the character of her husband. Scarcely less anxious than the expectant wife was her companion, though the poor girl could claim no other relationship with Hannibal than those kindred ties which arose out of gratitude on the one side, and generous protection on the other. Some ten years before our tale commences, a shopkeeper in the neighbouring town, with whom our fisherman occasionally dealt for groceries, whenever a lucky pilchard season or other speculation allowed of his treating his good dame with such luxuries, had died insolvent, leaving an orphan girl totally unprotected for. Strike was one of the last belonging to the neighbourhood who was informed of this occurrence; he happening to have been absent just then, ill-natured people declared not for the purpose of passing goods through the custom-house, though several of the gentry within a few miles of Hannibal's abode had requested him to leave in their back premises certain ankors of Schiedam, "any time after nightfall, at his earliest convenience." We do not mean to hold the fisherman up as an example of propriety to all the meddlers with salt water along the coast of England; though we will not allow shameless libels on the character of Cornishmen to go forth unrefuted, we must not hide the fact that our hero, in common with most of his friends and neighbours, was more than suspected of doing a little smuggling. Nevertheless, Hannibal was a warm-hearted kind fellow, who could not hear of distress without trying to relieve it, unless, indeed, underwriters were the afflicted parties; and he forthwith took possession of the only property the grocer left behind him which the creditors did not covet, and brought home little Mary Harvey, as a playmate for his son, who was about four years her senior.

Well was his charitable act rewarded, when this boy, grown a stripling of fourteen, abandoned the home of his youth, and went forth a reckless adventurer, leaving to the child of the stranger those duties of filial love and obedience which he so cruelly forgot. The cottage of Hannibal Strike was not more than a mile from the beach where the wreck of the merchantman had caused the scene we have attempted to describe. The fisherman, as usual, had been the first to save life, and the last to cease plundering that which the prejudice of custom led him to consider lawful spoil; and now, as morning dawned, little thinking of those at home anxious for his safety, he was watching a small box or case which, though sufficiently buoyant to be raised on the crest of the wave, would again provokingly become lost in the trough of the sea; now appearing as if the next breaker would cast it at his feet, and then swept away just as the wrecker thought the prize within his grasp. During the night more than once had Hannibal saved life at imminent peril to himself; he had afterwards secured about his person several valuables which chance had cast in his way; had then taken his share in the tussle with the authorities; and now, could he but obtain that tempting case, he had prudently determined to make the best of his way to his cottage. A huge roller at length dashed the wished-for treasure fur on the beach; in an instant the wrecker seized it, and, placing it on his shoulders, commenced his retreat, congratulating himself that an abutment of the cliff had, as he thought, saved him from the observation of some sailors belonging to the cutter, then guarding a pile of goods about five hundred yards distant.

Hannibal, however, had not proceeded far along the beach, when a rough grasp on his shoulder, and a blow from the flat of a cut-

lass, made him drop his load and turn on his assailants, who were no other than Mr. Smart, a revenue-officer, and Dick Stretcher, his coxswain—"Now, Hannibal Strike, you old vagabond! if I don't get you sent across seas for this, never trust me!" cried the blustering official.

"No sure, sir, you won't," doggedly replied the fisherman, "and, if it warn't for them pistols, and that bit of bright iron, you should'nt rob me of what the sea gave me. Faith and troth, you should'nt. Arn't I saved two lives this blessed night? There's the old man up at the Dolphius; and the young vellor they thought was dead, and I dragged out of the wash of the waves—did n't Jan Pentreath tell me that his old 'oman and Gracy Dolcooth had brought un to life again? Not that I care to tell 'ee what I've done—I only mean I've earned my right to what I've got; and more than that, I seed nobody laid hand on a thing while life was to be saved; and a wreck's a God-send to the coast; and so it was in my vayther's time, and his vayther's afore him."

Smart responded to this plausible defence of wrecking with a sneer, ordered his coxswain to seize the case, and, coolly telling Hannibal he knew where to find him, would have walked off; but the old man caught him by the arm, and, as if reckless of consequences, said:—"Afore you go, Mr. Smart, first take a few words from Hannibal Strike. You say you know where to find me, please suro I believe 'ee do—case why?—you comes there for no good. But, whether you 'forms against me or no—if I see you a skulking about my door, trying to make a poor girl like my Mally forget her yartue, dang it if I doant make 'ee feel the weight of an old man's hand."

The party addressed seemed to wince under the stern gaze of the wrecker, but at length broke away with an impatient oath at his impertinence, and an assurance that the vengeance of the law should reach him for his morning's work. He would have secured Hannibal on the spot, but two or three stragglers were approaching, and the revenue-officer, by a constant harsh exercise of his always unpopular duties, had few friends among the fishermen; thus he might calculate on being opposed rather than assisted by the new comers. Smart, who was a good-looking but unprincipled man, prided himself much on his intrigues. Long had he sought to lure Mary from the path of innocence, and his enmity to Hannibal Strike arose from a conviction that the honest counsel of the old man had been the cause of his having failed in his designs.

Even younger in mind than years, the gentle girl had at first felt gratified by the attentions of one whom she considered far above her in station; and, ere his dishonourable motives were discovered, she had nearly rendered to him that gift which is seldom to be recalled—a maiden's heart. But Hannibal's sound though homely reasoning aroused her from a dangerous dream before it was too late. When the revenue-officer received his dismissal, Mary's lips trembled not to give it utterance, and her affection towards her benefactor seemed, if possible, increased by this act of faithful guardianship.

We will now carry the reader to "The Dolphius," a little public house, bearing a sign-board exhibiting the semblance of three nondescript fishes, by courtesy allowed to be thus designated. In a small sanded parlour, stretched on a rude couch formed of sails and blankets supported on chairs, was an elderly man, who, though clothed in the rough garb of the humble people around him, bore the appearance of a gentleman. On his brow were graven not only the furrows of Time's relentless share, but there too might be traced the deeper lines that tell of age anticipated by sorrow. This was the individual to whom Hannibal Strike had referred as "the old man up at the Dolphius."

It would be of little importance to our narrative did we trace the early career of the stranger whom we have occasion to introduce; suffice it to say that, many years before shipwreck cast him on the coast of Cornwall, he had been a wealthy planter in the Island of Barbadoes, when a destructive fire in his dwelling and plantations reduced him to comparative poverty, the same stroke of adversity depriving him of his wife and child, to whom he was devotedly attached. Feeling every aim of existence thus suddenly snatched from him, he became disgusted with his colonial pursuits, placed his estates in the hands of an agent, and, with the hope of dissipating his grief, had travelled through many parts of North and South America; nor did he return to the West Indies till the reported improvement in his property, a weariness of wandering, and a wish to secure a favourable opportunity of selling his estates, induced him to revisit Barbadoes. The settlement of his affairs effected, Mr. Mortram sailed for England, having prophetically announced to the few friends that Time had left him in the colonies his intention of going home to die in his native land.